Unity & Friends Response to the Working Group.

24 August 2014

1. Identify any challenges or new insights raised for members of the group by the commentary on the theological dimensions of marriage service.

The challenges we identified:

* The presumption that this marriage service is normative when many celebrants don’t use it or feel the need to alter it in order for it to be relevant to contemporary couples, especially those who desire a church wedding but are not church members or Christians.
* The theology of the marriage service does not reflect contemporary critical biblical scholarship nor a broad theological spectrum.
* Confining the commentary to theological dimensions of the marriage service does not take into account contemporary sociological and psychological scholarship on marriage and the holistic development of persons in relationship.
* The commentary does not adequately reflect the theology of companionship; does not reflect the theology behind the shift from an economic and child-rearing basis for marriage to a companionship basis for marriage.
* We are challenged by how the church makes statements about the meaning and purpose of marriage without becoming dogmatic; how does our theology of marriage reflect that we are people on the way?
* We are challenged by the presumption that a doctrine of creation-fall-redemption is the only normative theology invoked in the service of marriage, to the exclusion of other theological emphases.

The new insights we identified:

* How might the current emphasis on companionship as the basis for marriage be a jumping off point for theological reflection on the purpose of marriage and our theological understanding of relationships more generally?
* The clear statements at the end of the document transcend gender borders and this is a lost opportunity if we don’t talk about right relationships and the values underpinning relationship.
* It's dishonest to say the bible supports marriage as we understand it.
* The shift in basis of understanding marriage from the context for procreation to that of companionship is related to the fact that we might, in practice, marry people who are intentionally deciding to remain childless and/or people who are not practising Christians. What are the implications to these changes in practice as they relate to the possibility of change in our practice with regard to marriage equality? We are particularly mindful of disabled persons, infertile couples and couples becoming pregnant through IVF or surrogacy.
* We were reminded of other models of how church and government relate with regard to marriage, such as in Europe where there is civil marriage with the option of a church blessing as well as a model of legal recognition of the committed relationship that is not marriage but comes with all the rights of marriage. We were also aware of traditions in some African countries in which traditional marriage is simply the decision of a couple that they are married which the community endorses.
* The discussion needs to be about equal marriage or marriage equality, not same-gender marriage.

1. If the government were to legislate to enable same-gender couples to marry, what issues or questions would this raise for you?

The issues it would raise for members of our group:

* Not many if government chooses civil unions because this would not change the church’s theology and practice of marriage. (Though a potential issue might be what that implies for ministers who are celebrants licensed by the church.)
* Will the UCA exempt itself as a block or can it allow individual ministers to choose? Can individual ministers opt out? (At one time it was determined that ministers who may object to infant baptism were not allowed to opt out of the practice. Is this a precedent or too different to have any application?)
* With regard to requirements of candidates for ordination, two issues were raised:]
  + could there be a transition time for conscientious objection, after which time one must be willing to celebrate weddings of same-gender couples in order to be ordained UCA
  + might questions about willingness to celebrate weddings of same-gender couples be included in the current questions asked during the selection process (*ie* willing to work alongside women colleagues, etc.)
  + how might this issue become part of the process during the period of discernment so that candidates have opportunity to consider their vocation in light of the church’s practice?
* Changes need to be made to the marriage service regardless of the UCA stance on marriage equality in order to be more in keeping with the current understandings of marriage raised by the public debate leading to such a government decision, for the sake of relevancy and inclusivity. Useful to this process would be to investigate sacred union ceremonies. The theological underpinnings need to be rethought and developed in keeping with the companionship emphasis in contemporary practice and in keeping with current theology.
* Do we need to stop using the term “marriage” across the board, including with regard to the recognition of committed relationship and blessing thereof between one heterosexual man and one heterosexual woman? (There is no biblical or theological foundation for the institution of marriage as practised and understood today, so maybe the term “marriage” is no longer useful or appropriate.)

Questions raised in the group:

* Would it be obligatory for a minister to marry same gender couples or might there be an exemption?
* Could it be that the church might allow individuals to exempt themselves?
* Can congregations make the decision about whether they will be a place for equal marriage or not?

1. What would you see as appropriate responses by the Uniting Church?

-pastorally for members

-pastorally for wider community

-in the church’s practices concerning Christian marriage

-in relation to the government and the church’s role in conducting marriages

-in any celebration or blessing of same-gender relationships?

Overall, the group said they would respond with a sense of wholeheartedly welcoming the decision of the government to legislate to enable same-gender couples to marry.

*It would be appropriate for the Uniting Church to respond pastorally for members with:*

* a theologically informed educative process for the whole church so that those who want to affirm it feel they can do so from the standpoint of their faith (as with the regulations and process around sexual misconduct) so that all have the opportunity for their faith and theology to grow
* a presentation of this moment as a step towards reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation
* a theological statement about what it means to be reformed and reforming; a statement about the church’s capacity to take on new insights; a statement about the on-going journey towards the promised goal of reconciliation and renewal
* help with integrating same-gender couples into the life of the church and deconstructing the church’s institutionalised heteronormativity; affirmation for people who are not heteronormative
* an opportunity to open up next layers of openness and to re-address the discussion of right relationships so as to emphasize content rather than form and gender
* resources to help infuse the community with greater and greater openness and welcome
* "language that is care - ful" to include, care for everybody
* pastoral care for same-gender couples who may be feeling additional pressure and scrutiny
* resources to help the church continue to accompany and encourage LBGTI in the period after the government makes a decision like this but whilst there may yet be cultural backlash

*It would be appropriate for the Uniting Church to respond pastorally to the wider community with:*

* celebration and embrace and inclusiveness and welcome; sense of pride in the country (and hopefully affirmed by the church)
* an apology to LBGTIQ people for the treatment they have experienced at hands of church and christians over the centuries
* a statement of repentance for the above
* public commitment to “get our house in order” (as was done with the process of including recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Preamble)

*It would be appropriate for the Uniting Church to respond in its practices with:*

* greater flexibility in the types of relationship recognition and covenanting services we offer
  + revisions to reflect:
    - people who aren’t Christian
    - recent critical biblical scholarship
    - current practices of clergy
    - universal values as articulated through Christianity
    - an articulation that recognises we are people on the way rather than a complete and dogmatic view

*It would be appropriate for the Uniting Church to respond in relation to the government and church’s role in conducting marriages by:*

* being more inclusive
* opening up to the idea of marriage being a civil ceremony with an optional church blessing (given that the church doesn’t “own” weddings anymore than we “own” funerals)
* if they take out “man and woman” exclusivity in definition of marriage, then response is to say we'll marry any combination of any gender
* for the church to follow suit immediately and follow government lead

*It would be appropriate for the Uniting Church to respond to any celebration or blessing of same-gender relationships by:*

* if the government recognises civil unions, then our response is to say that is not marriage equality and to indicate it has not gone far enough; if anything other than marriage is recognised, it will inevitably be seen and treated as inferior

1. Should the Uniting Church reconsider its understanding of marriage at this time?

YES

why: see above, but to summarise:

* exclusive of same-gender relationships
* exclusive of the changes reflected in society
* doesn't reflect latest theology, critical biblical scholarship, sociology or psychology (and therefore contravenes the Basis of Union commitment to continued learning from all available sources)
* we are people on the way
* because it is time - it is being discussed in contemporary culture
* “marriage” is ripe for redefinition even if marriage equality were not the issue (which is why the church’s process of engagement must needs reflect current sociological information)
* we still have not come to terms with the concepts of “right relationships” as included in the documents from 1997
* we still have not come to terms with gender equality and its implications with regard to power differentials in relationships sanctioned by church and state
* we need the church to be led by the Spirit, as discerned in community; we believe it is God's spirit moving throughout the whole community towards a reconsideration; active in the world; stirring us up towards new understandings
* the doctrinal pattern of creation-fall-redemption is not the only faithful pattern upon which to draw and may not be the most appropriate for the wedding service; the privileging of this single doctrine within the marriage service should be reconsidered
* the current wedding service leads with the fallen state (confession) rather than celebration of creation
* there are theological alternatives that could be explored within an array of service options:
  + theology of original blessing
  + new understandings of at-one-ment
  + evolutionary theology
  + process theology
  + covenant theology
* it is not biblically sound to say that “God has created; Christ has blessed” this way of life and therefore the current service is dishonest on this point
* how might the theology of marriage be explored from a hermeneutic of suspicion - who are the “winners” in the current theology and who are the “losers” and does this privileging reflect culture or faith?
* there is “yet more light and truth” to break forth
* we do not have a fullness of understanding of what it means to made in the image of God; genderless God - what does that mean? or gender inclusive God? if we move beyond gender, how does that exclude and harm trans-gendered persons?
* this issue calls into question whether or not early Christian theology was too eschatological to extrapolate theology from for today

1. What other issues are important to you in relation to these matters?

* It felt as if we were offering our responses to the biases and presuppositions of the DWG (because of the constraints of limiting the conversation to the current wedding service), such as that the wedding service (marking the singular occasion of the ceremony of the wedding) does not encompass a theology of marriage (which is the life-time of relationship following the one day of celebration)
* We were not invited in this process to go back to first principles: what is marriage?
* The process felt like a sharing of ignorance and reaction/opinion rather than considered, in-depth response because it was not guided by robust scholarship in all the areas impacting these considerations: critical biblical scholarship; current theological insights, and from a variety of sources; sociological and psychological input. We hope materials from the DWG for future engagement in this process would include:
  + a sociological statement on marriage, theological statement on marriage, critical biblical scholarship statement about marriage
  + revisiting the statement on "right relationships" from sexuality report from 1997

We were all people from the majority Australian culture and did not have particular questions or insights to offer from a distinctive ethno-cultural community (and appreciated what was included in the materials from a variety of communities).

Elements of the materials we found surprising:

* didn’t find anything suggesting the existence of LBGTIQ persons and communities throughout history and across cultures and as part of the church
* the emphasis on Genesis 1
* no inclusion of new understandings by theologians
* lack of theology
* based so closely on marriage service - not going as far as the Assembly wanted the process to go
* constraints bias the process and responses
* the questions were more broad in the initial consultation
* assumes a level playing field in terms of power and this is not reality

Aspects we would want emphasised more:

* biblical interpretations done with academic credibility
* information on the sociology of marriage included
* recognition that marriage is not a one-day exercise (as presented by emphasis on singular ceremonial moment)
* frame of using the service is inadequate to address the full theology of marriage
* only 2 forms of marriage are assumed - straight or queer - and this is limiting
* where is the biblical evidence for “God created, Christ blessed” marriage?

Members of the group spent a few minutes articulating their experience of engaging the materials:

positive about:

* glad the process has started
* the diversity of views included
* special consideration of CALD and Congress communities
* all views got a hearing (this was not the experience of one member of the group involved in earlier consultation process)
* faithful reporting (another member didn’t see the input from a group they had been involved in reflected in the reporting)

negative about:

* some information/input did not appear
* a significant bible passage was not included: 1 John 4:16b
* the language needs to be updated: not same-gender marriage but marriage equality or equal marriage
* marriage service constricts the conversation, including constricting it to a focus on the wedding occasion
* it was not the experience that previous consultation groups were careful to include a diversity of views (though a diversity of views may have been invited, the experience for one member of the group was to feel singled out and “put in a box” by the others involved).

people felt:

* overwhelmed by the quantity
* relieved that the material is out there; sad that it might not be helpful
* disappointed
* hopeful that church is hearing views

questions raised:

* Is Genesis 1 an appropriate text for today’s understanding of marriage?
* Why no sociological input; no cultural theory engagement?
* Where is the focus on right relationships and the values of what make relationships work?